

# LEADERS IN HEALTH CARE

*Ellen Nelson, PhD was confirmed as director of the Rhode Island Department of Mental Health, Retardation, and Hospitals (MHRH) by the General Assembly in the spring of 2006. Prior to assuming the role of director, Dr. Nelson was associate commissioner of public health in Massachusetts. She held leadership positions at Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and Brown University in addition to serving as president and CEO of Bradley Hospital. MHRH has nearly 2,000 employees and a budget of approximately \$500 million. The department oversees services for adults with developmental disabilities, services for mental health and the state-run Eleanor Slater Hospital.*



## ***What attracted you to the Director's position?***

When Governor Carcieri selected me to lead the Department of MHRH, he charged me with establishing and implementing a vision and plan to assure that the Department is well prepared to meet the current and future needs of individuals with long term medical and psychiatric illnesses, and persons with developmental disabilities. This is a very exciting opportunity. The Department has excellent resources – an excellent staff; facilities range from outpatient services, residential group homes across the state, and two hospital campuses; and we have excellent contractual partnerships with many community agencies which provide care to our clients. These resources combine to provide an excellent base of opportunity to position MHRH to assure that there is adequate capacity within a coordinated continuum of care and support to meet the current and future needs of individuals with special health care needs.

## ***What in your prior experience will help you achieve the goals of the Department?***

In my last position (2004-2006) I served as associate commissioner for the Department of Public Health for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. In this position, I was a key public policy leader in the formulation of health policy for the state of Massachusetts. I was responsible for four public hospitals with a bed capacity of approximately 1000. This included medical, surgical, and mental health services for individuals of all ages, including individuals who were incarcerated. In addition, I was responsible for statewide control

of communicable diseases, the state laboratory, and the state operated and managed pharmacy.

During the previous ten years, I had my own consulting business where I led strategic planning for many public and private organizations throughout New England. These organizations provide services for individuals with mental illness, developmental disabilities, or problems with substance abuse. From 1988 to 1993, I was president and CEO of the Emma Pendleton Bradley Hospital and led the hospital in a major financial turnaround. Before that, I was vice president of Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island, responsible for the development and operation of HMO Rhode Island, the precursor of Blue CHIP.

My experience serves me well as I assume the leadership of MHRH and develop and implement a coordinated plan of services for those served by this agency. I look forward to the challenge of leading MHRH into the future.

## ***The services provided by the Department have evolved with the needs of Rhode Islanders. How do you envision the future of the Department?***

My long term vision for the department, its programs and the welfare of the clients will build on the input of all stakeholders. By the year 2008, the Department of MHRH will be focused, organizationally equipped, and managing under a master plan to ensure that all individuals served and supported by the department have access to appropriate services and supports along a comprehensive continuum of care guided by

best practice standards. My first step will be to lead the department in a process to enhance the statewide continuum of care for persons with disabilities by engaging department staff and the community in a collaborative assessment and planning process. I have charged a team, made up of MHRH staff and outside consultants, to conduct an assessment that will first describe the history of the department's population and services, the current population the department serves, and the services that we currently provide. During September and early October, the team will be reaching out to our clients, advocates and other community partners to identify the strengths in our delivery system, as well as opportunities to improve the continuum of care and supports we provide. We will be asking if MHRH is serving everyone who needs our services. Is MHRH providing an accessible coordinated continuum of needed services and supports, and ensuring that each individual is receiving services in the least restrictive, most appropriate setting to meet their individual needs? We will be asking for input from the state's hospital community that will provide important input to our understanding of the role Eleanor Slater Hospital should play in the state's health care delivery system. In addition, the process will research best practices, and look at models of other systems of health care and supports for individuals with disabilities across the country. The resulting plan will incorporate the findings and recommendations, which will most effectively meet the future needs of Rhode Island's most vulnerable citizens.

***What is your long term vision for Eleanor Slater Hospital? What do you see as the hospital's role in the statewide health care system?***

I see the mission of Eleanor Slater Hospital as serving all Rhode Islanders who require an extended hospital stay to manage their chronic, long term medical and/or psychiatric health needs, with the goal of providing stabilization, treatment and rehabilitative services that will allow these individuals to return to appropriate settings in the community. I see the opportunity to establish the Eleanor Slater Hospital as the state's recognized "Center of Excellence" for assessment and management of individuals, with complex medical or psychiatric needs, requiring an extended inpatient stay. This is an opportunity for the Cranston hospital campus to enhance its capacity to provide care for individuals requiring long term

hospital level care because of dependency on ventilators, who need stabilization and treatment for a chronic medical or mental health condition, and those needing specialized medical, nursing, or rehabilitative services. In addition, I want to assure that the Zambano campus of the hospital, located in Burrillville, has adequate capacity to provide long term, hospital level care to Rhode Islanders with complex medical conditions, such as those with brain or spinal cord injuries and neurodegenerative conditions, as well as serious, chronic medical conditions with significant psychiatric co-morbidity. I would like to build on the department's collective expertise by developing a new capacity to provide needed short-term assessment, stabilization and treatment for individuals in crisis due to psychiatric or substance abuse issues, including individuals with developmental disabilities.

The role of the Eleanor Slater Hospital will be designed to complement, not duplicate, services available elsewhere in Rhode Island's health care delivery system. We see close coordination and collaboration with Rhode Island's community and psychiatric hospitals as critical to ensuring that patients are served in the most appropriate setting.

***As the only long term hospital in the state, how does Eleanor Slater Hospital interact with other hospitals?***

I want to strengthen our relationships with the state's community hospitals and hope to foster a clearer understanding of our hospital's mission, services, and capacity. As well, I am counting on the hospital community to help us understand the community needs that can be appropriately met by Eleanor Slater Hospital. I envision a strong collaboration with the community and teaching hospitals to maximize all of our collective abilities to meet the needs of Rhode Islanders. I look to the opportunities to partner with the hospital community to foster innovation, create research and training opportunities, integrate best practice standards, and assure the most efficient and effective use of the resources in our health care system. I also look forward to creating and maintaining a close working relationship with the hospitals through the Hospital Association of Rhode Island as we develop and implement the future plan for MHRH.

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